

# *Best Training Practices*

A Training Tipsheet

*Extra!*

**Creating  
e-ffective  
e-learning:**

**13 Tips for Maximizing Your  
Return On Investment in  
On-line Course Delivery**

*Will Kenny*

***www. BestTrainingPractices.com***

*"Let me explain something for you . . ."*

## Introduction

Technically speaking, putting a training course on-line has never been easier. New tools make it possible for anyone, with no computer programming knowledge, to construct a course that can be taken by any participant with access to the Internet, or to your corporate intranet, using only a web browser.

That's **technically speaking**, as I said, and the companies that provide "do-it-yourself" on-line course creation tools harp on how fast and easy to use their systems are.

*But the technical aspects of creating on-line training have never been the hardest part*, anymore than booking a classroom with an overhead projector is the hardest part of live training. Good course design that makes use of the delivery format and supporting resources remains the real challenge.

*You can "do-it-yourself" more easily than ever, but it isn't any easier to do it right.*

In the haste to take advantage of these "do-it-yourself" tools, a lot of people have uploaded a lot of very bad training, to be frank. And if your on-line offerings don't get the job done, if they don't produce real benefits to the business from training participants, you'll find that people remember that. If you're developing courses internally for a corporation, participants will just "go through the motions" and get these courses over with as quickly as possible. If you're selling on-line courses to individuals and companies, you can kiss your repeat business goodbye.

**Navigation Tip:** if you're reading this on your computer screen, open the "Bookmarks" panel to use a hyperlinked Table of Contents to jump to the topics that interest you.

This *Training Tipsheet Extra* puts on-line course creation back in the right context. When new course development tools save you time, that means you have more time to do a better job of course design, a better job of putting supporting resources in place, a better job of ensuring that true learning takes place *and* that that learning is applied in the workplace to spread best practices throughout the organization.

It may help to frame the challenge of using "do-it-yourself" tools in terms of an earlier "do-it-yourself" transition: word-processing software.

© Copyright 2007 Will Kenny/Best Training Practices. All Rights Reserved.  
Do not reproduce or excerpt without written permission

## The Word Processing Revolution

Maybe you're not old enough to have ever operated a typewriter. The arrival of word processing software made it much easier to revise text, to replace things and move them around, so documents would have fewer mistakes, and those that did occur could be corrected quickly. This might not seem amazing if that's the only way you've ever written and printed a document, but at one time, making significant changes to something you had written generally required doing the whole thing over again!

Word processing offered huge time savings. Corrections and revisions were infinitely faster than re-typing.

But many companies expected benefits from word processing that went way beyond just eliminating spelling mistakes. One of the great assumptions that came along with word-processing tools was that **they would make all of us better writers!**

Many, many people believed that as we wrote memos and policies and other communications, we would draft a document and then look through it and find ways to improve it. We'd all hone our memos and other documents into masterpieces of communication.

Now, if you read half of what comes across your desk, you know this didn't happen. Word-processing tools did not turn poor writers into good ones. They did, however, make *some* people more effective writers.

The people who produced better writing when word-processing became available were those who *already were better than most of us at writing*. In other words, word processing enhanced the quality of the product *only* when used by people who were *already* producing superior quality communications.

*Fixing things faster didn't automatically lead to better communication, except for the people who invested the time savings into better thinking and design.*

Why? Because they were better at revising, at seeing where they could improve the clarity or brevity (or both) of a passage. They had the skills to take advantage of what these new tools offered. They were better at the "**thinking about writing**" part of the job, which has much more to do with structure and the flow of information than it has to do with picking just the right word.

And the ease of revision and formatting allowed them *to put more*

© Copyright 2007 Will Kenny/Best Training Practices. All Rights Reserved.  
Do not reproduce or excerpt without written permission

*Reinvest the time these tools save in better course design and content.*

*This isn't a review of specific tools, but a guide to using these kinds of tools to produce results for your organization.*

*time into thinking about how to produce the best result.* They re-invested the time that instant revision offered them into better content structure, better examples and analogies, greater impact on the reader.

Word processing *also* makes it easier, frankly, for a lot of poor writing to be produced even more often and more quickly. And it has led to a lot of documents that look very pretty, but don't make much sense.

"Do-it-yourself" on-line course development tools offer similar options. They can give you back some time to produce better results, or they can just be a shortcut to low-quality -- but pretty -- on-line materials that will quickly erode your credibility with your audience.

This *Training Tipsheet Extra* will help you produce better results.

### **What I Won't Tell You**

This report does *not* recommend specific technology. There are many, many sources of software products and services you can use to put your course material on-line.

The best tools for *you* depend on a range of factors -- internal vs. external audience, the particular features you need in your courses, whether you need score tracking and reporting, whether you need multi-language development capability, and so on.

My goal is to help you build a better design for your on-line course, to draw a better blueprint for using, say, browser-based delivery to educate others about best practices. If you do your homework, keeping the recommendations below in mind, you'll be in a much better position to select the best tools to meet your needs.

And your audience, be they employees, prospects, customers, or others with an interest in your topic, will be *much more impressed by how much they learn, and how well they can use that information*, than they will be by the technical aspects of the course delivery.

## Don't Wait For Feedback To Come To You

---

You've probably taken an on-line course of some kind. If you didn't like it, or couldn't understand it, whom did you tell, and how did you let them know?

Perhaps you had to send an e-mail to someone, or go to a special comments section. That meant taking an extra step, probably at a different time -- so it was easy to get busy and forget about it, or decide not to bother.

*In most on-line courses, feedback takes an extra step or two -- which is an **obstacle** to getting the information you need to improve the course.*

Contrast that with being in the classroom, where an instructor who has lost everyone, or annoyed everyone, gets the message immediately. Body language tells you if participants are bored, interested, lost, or resistant. They ask questions that highlight items you've skipped or overlooked. And they may make direct comments about the course, or challenge statements from the seminar leader, again pointing to topics and activities that could be revised for greater impact.

*In the classroom, there is a lot more immediate feedback than in on-line courses.*

I'm sure you'll provide an e-mail link for your on-line course, maybe even a comments page of some kind, so that people can contact you with questions or comments. But you'll lose a lot of feedback if you just sit back and wait for it to roll in.

**The lack of immediate feedback is one of the biggest challenges associated with on-line courses.**

*E-mailing you feedback is an extra step that most people won't take.*

Writing an e-mail is an extra step, and simple as it seems, it just takes a little more time and effort than raising your hand in class and firing off a question. As they take your newly-developed on-line course, your participants will see things that you've overlooked, or that could be done better. And they'll make "mental notes" with good intentions to send you a e-mail when they are done with that lesson.

But they'll forget, or something will come up, and you'll never hear

© Copyright 2007 Will Kenny/Best Training Practices. All Rights Reserved.  
Do not reproduce or excerpt without written permission

Don't just "listen" for comments, **ask** for them.

from them.

So, for at least the first few offerings of the course, **you** should start the conversation. Make sure you are notified when someone registers for a course, and then send an e-mail to the participant about the time he or she would be partway through the lessons. Ask if they've started the course, if they've had any trouble navigating, if they've encountered things that don't make sense.

Do something similar when they complete the course, to see if they feel they have learned something they can use on the job.

Keep these notes short, and end with a sincere invitation to contact you with their reactions. You'll learn a lot more about how to make the course better than you will waiting for their good intentions to find their own way into your e-mailbox.

## **Learning Pays Off When It Transfers To The Workplace**

---

---

If the last thing a "student" gets from a course is a score (or not even that, just a "Congratulations, you're done!" page), you're missing a great opportunity to maximize their retention and application of what you've taught.

*New, better ways of doing things don't just implement themselves.* People have habits, and under the usual time pressures and stresses of their lives and jobs, they fall back on them when they should be applying the new practices they've just learned. This applies to *all* training and communications, regardless of the delivery format.

Completing a course doesn't automatically lead to applying what has been learned.

So whether they've just taken a live seminar, read a policy manual, or taken an on-line course, they'll get a lot farther putting new practices to work if they get a nudge afterwards, perhaps some suggestions for how to start using the new information, and an opportunity to clarify things that don't seem as simple in the real world as they did when they were in the middle of the course.

That said, the value of follow up is probably even greater for self-paced, browser-based training, *particularly* when the training isn't purely technical. A purely technical example would be using on-line training to learn word-processing software. Using the software

afterwards is very similar to the course activities.

But learning about more effective negotiation practices in an on-line course, and then doing it with real people in actual business situations, is a larger leap, a more challenging transfer of learning.

*Follow-up doesn't have to be time-consuming or expensive.* Delegation and automation can do a lot to streamline things. (You can experience automated follow-up yourself with a simple simulation. See my "[Extend Your Impact](#)" tutorial at [www.besttrainingpractices.com/case/follow\\_start.htm](http://www.besttrainingpractices.com/case/follow_start.htm) .)

Good follow up is a powerful tool that is easily overlooked when you're using browser-based development tools, because this is by definition something outside of the development/delivery environment. It's an e-mail, a postcard, a phone call, a conversation at a meeting.

Good follow up is part of the broader design of effective training and communication, something that is much larger than simply "making an on-line course." And it pays huge dividends.

*"Changing employee behavior," the goal of all training and communication, is a much bigger task than just "making a course."*

---

## Shortcut Construction, Not Design And Development

---

Back to our word processing analogy . . .

In the hands of a skillful writer, word-processing software can lead to better writing -- by which I mean both better wording *and* better structure, better flow of the content. Indeed, one of the things that makes excellent business writers and content developers stand out is their ability to dole out information in the right order, in units of the appropriate size.

*Good writing comes from careful content design, not "wordsmithing."*

With a word processor, the writer can move whole units of content around until the document reflects the optimal flow, the ideal content structure, to produce the desired effect. And the writer can also polish up the writing a bit, because revisions are easier. But make no mistake, the structural thinking has a lot more to do with effective communication than does the "wordsmithing."

All this means that the writer probably spends *more* time thinking

© Copyright 2007 Will Kenny/Best Training Practices. All Rights Reserved.  
Do not reproduce or excerpt without written permission

*Good content structure, the key to success, takes time and work.*

about the structure of the communication, because the software can save a lot of time in actually putting things in the right order when the "design" of the writing has been figured out.

In a similar way, please remember that "do-it-yourself" on-line course development tools make it easier to realize your design in a web-based, browser-delivered format. But **they do very little to help you with that design in the first place.**

The ease of course deployment with these tools is a *trap* that catches people who think the hard part of creating an on-line course is getting it out on, say, an intranet. In reality, the hard part is making *decisions* about what information to deliver, what to omit or simplify, how to explain and illustrate concepts, what order to discuss the topics in. That's the same as with a live seminar, *except that* for the on-line course, *you also have to anticipate* questions, imagine how a user might get lost or misinterpret instructions, and generally set up the course to "pre-answer" questions that a facilitator usually answers in the classroom.

On-line delivery through a browser is mainly about **delivery**. New tools shorten the final steps in the course development process, but **only** the final steps. Unless you do a thorough job of creating an effective structure and anticipating user reactions and needs, you're going to put a course out there that everyone will recognize as of "do-it-yourself," not *professional*, quality.

---

## Take Advantage Of Modular Design

---

An on-line course is made of many individual pages, usually grouped into units of various lengths. Advocates of on-line training make much of the need to deliver content in more numerous, shorter segments, as opposed to fewer, longer units.

While that argument is frequently *over-extended*, using the modular nature of these courses to mix in other experiences is almost always *under-extended*, if you will.

Let's put it this way. If you have two similar instructional units, A and C, it does not automatically follow that you have to deliver the middle unit, B, the same way you do the other two.

© Copyright 2007 Will Kenny/Best Training Practices. All Rights Reserved.  
Do not reproduce or excerpt without written permission

*It is all too easy to think that **everything** has to happen on-line.*

Once people get into the on-line course development environment, there is a tendency to think that the entire learning experience must be on-line! But most best practices must be nurtured in several modes, using computing tools, face-to-face or phone interactions with colleagues and customers and suppliers, and so on.

Instead of working harder to force everything you want your participants to learn into the same on-line format, identify content that on-line delivery will handle well (and that is straightforward to develop on-line, if your resources are limited), and also identify opportunities to use other modalities *in the middle of the on-line course*.

For example, suppose you work through the basic steps in a sales conversation, on-line, perhaps even watch a role-play or two on-line. But then your next "module" is to call up a mentor within the company and deliver a simulated sales call. Following that experience, return to the on-line course for additional in-depth modules on each step in the conversation -- modules that will mean much more to the student after that human interaction, after they know how it feels to try to follow the process in real time.

*Don't make delivery format decisions on a "one size fits all" basis.*

Different delivery methods have different strengths for different types of content and their application on the job. Sometimes I see companies that are following one fad after another. First, everything is in the classroom. Then everything goes on line. Later, regional conferences are the solution to a whole slew of problems. Whatever the preferred tool is at the moment, it is the solution to every training and communication need.

Don't let the power of a new tool blind you to the *even greater power of a variety of tools, each suited to a particular task*.

## **Test Content Off Line Before Putting It On Line**

---

For all that the suppliers of your on-line course development tools will tout easy revision as a feature of their products, in fact, revisions are often complex. That means that anything you can do to reduce your revisions after you upload your "first draft" version will save you a lot of time and work.

© Copyright 2007 Will Kenny/Best Training Practices. All Rights Reserved.  
Do not reproduce or excerpt without written permission

*Testing your content before building on-line materials saves a lot of time and money in revisions, corrections, and enhancements.*

And the best thing you can do is **test your content in various ways before you build the on-line version.**

Now, if you're converting a course that has already been done live, you may have most of the information you need. If not, pilot the material with colleagues, employees, or with friends and colleagues who are similar to your intended customers.

Professional facilitators who make their living giving seminars know that there are a lot of changes the first few times you deliver a course. And their secret is that many of these changes are discovered on the fly, in those first couple of sessions, when the original "script" is found to overlook some things, to dwell too long on others, and to handle some topics less clearly than one would like.

When a pro is in seminar, adjustments begin on the spot. A question comes up, or perhaps the facilitator just picks up on the lack of interest, or the amount of confusion, in the room. New analogies are inserted, digressions provide background, activities that aren't working are cut short.

And, if the instructor is smart, notes are taken, notes that are used to make sure that the next time the course is offered, it is a lot more effective.

*So, do you have to pilot the course in a classroom with a group of students to work out the bugs?*

**Not at all.** Test explanations, activities, and other components of the course in *small segments with various people*. You can give an abbreviated lecture, have them try a role play, give your pitch over the phone, or have them read some of the materials. You can get together with friends and family to present an explanation, or an application of the lesson, and see if they can follow you. There are lots of ways to simulate delivering the course without doing the full-blown version in a real environment. You could even use video- or teleconferencing for some parts.

*Get feedback in a live, interactive conversation, in person or over the phone.*

However you do it, *collect their reactions in a real conversation, not an e-mail*. You want the *give and take* of a conversation, one that allows you to ask follow up questions, or to, say, revise your explanation on the spot and try it again.

© Copyright 2007 Will Kenny/Best Training Practices. All Rights Reserved.  
Do not reproduce or excerpt without written permission

Piloting gives you immediate feedback. Ask a student sitting in front of you a question, and you get an immediate feeling for whether he or she has mastered a concept. Have a student answer a question in an on-line course, and when you get the score, much later, you'll find out if the answer was correct -- and learn precious little about whether it was easy or hard to come to that answer, and whether you could have asked a better question, and taught a better answer.

Believe me, the time you spend "debugging" your content *before* you start building the on-line version will be repaid many times over. You'll build a better course, more quickly, and do a lot less fixing once it is available to your audience.

## **Don't Underestimate The Challenges Of Maintenance**

---

Revising an on-line course is quite different from revising a word-processing document, or a presentation. Of course, companies that provide software for generating on-line courses highlight how easy it is to pop in and fix things.

While that's true, it is mainly true about *small corrections*, about fixing typos and that sort of thing. It is easy to change the content of a *single page* in your on-line course. But when you discover, from early users, that more of the content and structure of the course needs to be enhanced, you could be facing some real challenges.

The difficulties arise from the underlying structure of courses that are delivered through a web browser, perhaps on your corporate intranet. These courses are composed of:

- Many individual units, usually fairly small, that are
- Linked to one another in a variety of ways.

*Which is easier to revise:  
a 30-page memo, or  
30 one-page memos?*

Imagine how it would be if you took a 30-page document you currently have on your computer and saved it as 30 individual one-page documents. Now, try to change a few things and you'll quickly see what I mean. Just finding the right page is challenging, and the "search-and-replace" tools available in most software for

© Copyright 2007 Will Kenny/Best Training Practices. All Rights Reserved.  
Do not reproduce or excerpt without written permission

*Making meaningful revisions has special challenges in on-line course development software, and if you don't allow enough time and resources for that, the course will never improve.*

creating on-line courses are generally much less powerful than they are in typical word-processing software.

And an on-line course doesn't necessarily have just one path through the information. With the availability of links between pages, or jumps to definitions, case studies, and other tools, you may find that revisions in some part of the course force you to re-think the connections between the various sections.

Compared to reordering slides in a PowerPoint presentation, or revising a printed "Leader's Guide" for a seminar, improving an on-line course after it is deployed is a slower, more difficult process.

And if you haven't factored that into your plans for the course, that's a course that will probably never get any better.

## **Enlist Other Team Members To Support The Participant**

When a course is put on-line, and *especially* when you use "do-it-yourself" software tools to build and upload the course, there's a tendency for the person who created the on-line materials to be the only human the participants interact with about the course content. It's "*your*" course, and you get the feedback, do follow up, send out instructions, and so on.

But many other people can play roles in enhancing participant learning along the way. *And the more people your participants talk to about the course material, the greater the impact the training will have on the employee's performance.*

*The more other players you can involve in the course, the greater the retention and application of the learning by the student.*

As you design the course, look for opportunities to apply practices such as:

- Incorporating assignments that require **interaction with the participant's manager or supervisor**. That could mean:
  - ◆ Working with the supervisor to select real-world data or situations to plug into on-line course exercises.
  - ◆ Assigning reports or recommendations that the participant will present to the manager.

© Copyright 2007 Will Kenny/Best Training Practices. All Rights Reserved.  
Do not reproduce or excerpt without written permission

*Learning in isolation is not nearly as powerful as sharing the journey with colleagues and managers.*

- ◆ Routing feedback and questions about the course to the manager on completion of the course.
- ◆ Role-playing applications of the content, like sales calls or customer service responses, with the supervisor.
- ◆ Creating an action plan for applying what has been learned, and discussing that plan with a manager.
- Making **interviews of knowledgeable players** part of the course (see "[Take Advantage of Modular Design](#)", above). This can be especially helpful for building teamwork, for helping participants learn how to work with people from other departments or functions to deliver the best results from company strategies.
- Enlisting participants who complete the course to **"buddy" later participants**. In other words, each participant who enrolls will have some scheduled contact with someone who completed the course earlier, and who has had time to apply what they learned. This **doubles your return on investment**: the new participant gets some guidance, and the former participant learns a lot from the questions of the new participants (teaching being one of the best ways to learn).
- Requiring the participant to **write a "letter to the file"** (just a couple of pages) describing what was learned from the course, and how the participant intends to use that information to enhance his or her performance. This should go into the file the manager uses during performance reviews or annual evaluations of the employee. That way, when the manager sits down to review the employee's performance, there will be a reminder to discuss whether the employee really did apply the new learning to the benefit of the company.
- Withhold "credit" for the course until the employee has written a **brief case study** showing how she or he used the course material in a real job situation.

Any of these steps can integrate the course more tightly into the workplace, and reduce the isolation that on-line delivery

© Copyright 2007 Will Kenny/Best Training Practices. All Rights Reserved.  
Do not reproduce or excerpt without written permission

sometimes brings to course material. They all strengthen the link between learning something and using it on the job, greatly increasing the benefit to the company of training the employee.

## Going Completely 'Paperless' May Just Slow Learning

You've learned a lot from reading, from policy manuals, procedure guides, and texts, and probably from some kind of "self-study" units or participants' guides to various topics.

Compared to a printed manual, of course, it is easy to see the allure of putting that material on-line, including these points:

- **No printing, no shipping or mailing**, instant delivery anywhere (with Internet access).
- **Testing and scoring** can be integrated into the course, and largely automated, operating without human intervention.
- Immediate **links to external sources** of information can be woven into the text.
- Lessons can be enhanced with **media**, etc.
- **Updating is immediate**. You change information in one place, and everyone who takes the course after that gets the updated version automatically.

And so on. *An easy win for the on-line approach?*

**Not so fast.** Sometimes there is just a lot of stuff that needs to be read, and there is no way around it. In those situations:

- **Reading** from paper is a lot easier than reading on a screen . . . and paper is actually *more portable* in many situations.
- **Navigating** a paper manual is sometimes easier, when the participant wants to back up or compare two sections. Although ease of navigation is touted as a feature of on-line lessons, that is only true if the course developer puts in the extra time to make it happen. In most cases where today's convenient on-line development tools are used to create a

*If the participants have a lot of reading to do in the course, it might be easier for them, and more effective as well, to cover some of that material on paper, rather than on-line.*

How do you mark up an on-line page?

course fairly quickly, only the minimal thought required to make the course work goes into allowing people to jump around. And no course development tool is going to make it easy for the user to view two different pages, much less sections, side by side.

- **Making notes and highlighting** key words and instructions is easy on a printed page. Personalizing the material is generally not possible on-line.

In other words, sometimes putting a lot of content on-line just makes it *harder, not easier*, to handle the material, and that will slow learning.

Balance is the key. Even if there is a lot of reading, not everything needs to be on paper by any means. Combine on-line and printed material (and even off line audio material). Use the on-line course to set up key concepts, to present tools such as interactive diagrams or recorded media, and to test comprehension.

But take advantage of the modular nature of on-line training. Separate on-line modules with reading material they can easily print out, carry around, mark up, *and* take back to their desks for useful reference tools that help them do their jobs.

## Try Usability Testing With A Non-Student

---

An excellent, and entertaining, guide to simplified usability testing can be found in the book "**Don't Make Me Think!**" by Steve Krug.

As you develop your course, it's good to have someone *try it out* from a *usability* perspective. Can they navigate through the course without difficulty? Can they use the help, support, testing, and other features easily? Can they focus on the content of the pages in your course, or do they have to hunt around for the next step all the time? Do they get frustrated or have a lot of questions about how the course works?

You can probably get better answers from your "usability testers" if you find people who *know very little about the subject of the course!* You only need a couple of people, maybe 3-4 for a long course, to run through things, but you have to remember you're **only** looking for information about the *structure of the course*, the navigation system, the clarity of the instructions and so on.

© Copyright 2007 Will Kenny/Best Training Practices. All Rights Reserved.  
Do not reproduce or excerpt without written permission

Test "ease of use" separately from content.

In other words, *separate the ease of using the course from the quality of its content.* (See the tip, "[Test Content Off Line . . .](#)")

Find a colleague from another department, recruit an assistant or clerical person, or enlist that executive around the corner who hardly ever uses a computer. Watch them work through the course and take notes on where they hesitate, when they have to ask questions, when they get lost or back up. Pay special attention to when and where they become frustrated, and be ready to accept that almost *all of that frustration is due to the way the course is laid out*, **not** to the character or expertise of the "student" (tester).

*A well-structured course with the right tools and support should be navigable by someone who can't understand the material.* Start with an "ignoramus" in your usability testing, and he or she will tell you whether the emperor is wearing any clothes (see my web site article on why "[You Need an Ignoramus](#)" at [www.besttrainingpractices.com/tt/ignoramus.htm](http://www.besttrainingpractices.com/tt/ignoramus.htm)).

## Build Your First Revision Into Your Development Budget

Most people will admit that the first version of any course they develop and deliver on-line will need a few tweaks. Of course, there will be some typos, some broken links, some confusing statements, all things that can be easily corrected with these incredibly convenient tools.

But beyond these mostly cosmetic fixes, too many people think of the course as "done" when they load it onto the intranet or the hosting service.

See the topics  
"[Test Content Off Line . . .](#)"  
and  
"[Try Usability Testing . . .](#)"

The truth is, unless you have thoroughly piloted the material and done some usability testing, *your course is almost sure to be more effective with some larger scale revisions*, based on what you learn from the first few students.

Software developers use "beta" versions to uncover problems that only real users -- not expert programmers or people in test labs -- will discover. A beta version is not-quite-ready-for-prime-time, but close enough to the finished product for someone to use in a real situation, revealing conflicts and inconveniences the developers

© Copyright 2007 Will Kenny/Best Training Practices. All Rights Reserved.  
Do not reproduce or excerpt without written permission

*Treat your first version of your on-line course as a 'beta release.'*

never anticipated.

A good software developer expects a lot of changes after the beta, before releasing the final product -- not changes in the major features of the program, or the purpose of various modules, but in how they work with each other, and how they are presented to the end user. *The best developers explicitly allot time and resources to move their software from beta versions to finished products.*

Don't short circuit this process with the courses *you* develop. That first batch of students will reveal -- if you listen, if you're willing to look at what's happening instead of being defensive -- many ways that the course could have a greater impact, be more efficient, do more to change employee behavior and skills and attitudes, and yield more results in favor of preferred practices.

When you block out your timeline for course development, make the final milestone a thorough review, with important revisions, after your first batch of students has gone through the course.

## Testing Participants' Knowledge: Content Vs. Format

---

When vendors of developer tools say that it's easy to make quizzes with their software, they are talking about *formatting and record keeping*. What they say is true, as far as it goes: you can quickly write, say, multiple-choice questions, designate answers, provide feedback, and score quizzes.

But whether on-line or on paper, *good tests that really measure learning, and do it fairly, can be quite hard to write*. That's why most questions on most tests -- whether those that business people or consultants put together with these development tools, or tests teachers write in schools and universities -- aren't all that good.

*Writing good test questions -- ones that separate those who have learned from those who have not -- is hard work!*

I've been involved with course testing on a major scale at the university level (as well as having produced tests in a wide range of academic and business settings over decades). In guiding a team of question writers to generate effective and fair tests for thousands of students, we used statistical analysis to give us insights into how well questions worked. And writing questions that *did* work was a slow process.

© Copyright 2007 Will Kenny/Best Training Practices. All Rights Reserved.  
Do not reproduce or excerpt without written permission

We're back to the word processing analogy again. Just because you can throw questions together quickly that look very nice and are easy to use doesn't mean you're effectively measuring knowledge. And if you don't review the results of the tests, over several students, and try to improve them, you're probably missing an opportunity to both assess and reinforce learning. It's funny how many people will revise the *content* of the course, responding to comments from users, but may *never review the performance of their tests and improve the questions*.

This is an area where more than one set of eyeballs can be very helpful, and where people differ in their skills. If the questions you write aren't getting the job done, see if you can find someone else -- inside or outside of your company -- who has a better knack for that sort of thing.

## Explicitly Assign Accountability For Monitoring Quality

---

*Unlike live seminars, on-line courses pretty much take care of themselves -- which means that you don't have the automatic reminders (set-up, scheduling, enrollment, reporting) that would nudge you to refine and update the material.*

One appeal of on-line courses is that once they are set up, they take care of themselves. Participants register, take the course, take a final test, and get credit for their training with very little human intervention.

*This is a blessing and a curse.* The good news is that a lot of time and administrative labor is saved, and that delivery is much more flexible -- a new hire can take a needed class immediately, without waiting for the next scheduled seminar.

The bad news is that often *no one's really paying attention to how things are going*. Sure, someone may get e-mails from students, but as mentioned in another tip, "[Don't Wait For Feedback](#)", on-line courses don't generate much feedback unless something is seriously wrong.

With a live seminar, or meetings and conferences, someone is responsible for setting up the course, for enrolling people, perhaps for stopping in to make sure everything is working. That serves as an automatic reminder that the course is out there, and a regular nudge to see if it's getting the job done.

But on-line courses don't give you that nudge. *Before you know it,*

© Copyright 2007 Will Kenny/Best Training Practices. All Rights Reserved.  
Do not reproduce or excerpt without written permission

*a course has been sitting out there a year, or two, and you've never updated it, never improved it. It may not be producing the results you expected. But since feedback is only looked at "when you have time", and there isn't a lot of feedback anyway, it just never gets to the top of your in-basket.*

Make sure someone has responsibility for monitoring the course, *in explicit ways and on a definite schedule, someone to:*

*Effective monitoring demands deliberate, frequent action.*

- frequently gather feedback e-mails and send summaries to the course developer;
- regularly contact recent "graduates" by phone or e-mail to explicitly ask about the course experience;
- contact *managers* of "graduates" periodically to ask what they heard about the course, and especially to ask if it has made any difference in the *employee's performance*;
- schedule regular meetings to review the course and plan updates and revisions.

On-line courses *"deliver themselves,"* once they are set up, but **they don't fix themselves**. If you don't have someone who is *known to be* responsible for the quality of the course, and actively engaged in collecting feedback and acting on it, your course will never turn into a truly useful and effective training tool.

## Don't Let "Available Anytime" Mean "Not On Company Time"

One of the most highly touted features of on-line training is that you can take a lesson "anytime, anywhere." Employees who are traveling can use the wireless connections in their hotel rooms to log on and learn . . .

*When do participants really do your coursework?*

. . . **after** they've put in a full day, most likely, traveling and working for the company.

With live training, managers *know* that employees will be taking some time away from their desks in order to learn to be more effective employees. That's an investment, and it pays a return.

© Copyright 2007 Will Kenny/Best Training Practices. All Rights Reserved.  
Do not reproduce or excerpt without written permission

*If the company will not give up any work time to take a course, how important can that course topic really be?*

Sometimes, though, on-line availability means "anytime but work time" to these same managers. They don't want to see their staff sitting at their desks working through lessons when they could be writing memos or serving customers.

If you subtly, or not-so-subtly, push employees to fit their on-line training activities into their "spare time" or their own time, you may end up reaping a *much smaller return on your training investment*:

- Trainees who are spending their own time, after work, donating unpaid overtime to get their training done, are **only interested in getting finished**. They'll take the quickest route to finishing the course, *not the most effective one*, not the one that will produce learning and change.
- Working on their own at home or in a hotel room **isolates course participants even more**. There's no colleague in the next cubicle, no manager just a phone call away (at that hour) to ask a question or discuss a case study. There's *less application of learning*.
- When you discourage an activity from happening at the office, **you send a clear message that it isn't as important as "real work"**. If improving work methods and adopting best practices isn't important enough to be done on company time, *it won't happen*.

There is no doubt that flexibility of delivery is an important feature of on-line courses. That feature is not automatically a benefit, however. To reap the benefits of on-line learning, make sure it happens in an environment, and on a schedule, that provides support and lends importance to the topic.

## *Best Training Practices*

If you have questions or comments about this Extra, or if you could use some help applying any of these ideas, please contact me at:

will@besttrainingpractices.com  
612-978-3050

***I help businesses spread best practices*** that enhance employee performance, by helping . . .

. . . organizations develop employee communication and training tools that ensure the front lines are applying strategies, policies, and best practices identified by management.

. . . companies and individuals reach their audiences through more powerful web content, newsletters and trade articles, and other communication tools.

. . . small businesses refine their target markets, products, and messages.

. . . content developers, trainers, and business writers develop and apply business strategies through my coaching and mentoring services.

. . . sales trainers integrate product knowledge more effectively into sales skills training.

***I am particularly useful to . . .***

. . . corporate staff for whom training is an added responsibility, who don't have a training or writing background. I develop tools *you* can use to reach your employees and influence their performance.

. . . freelancers, consultants, and small business owners who need "ghosting" of their messages in newsletters, print and on-line articles, and effective web site content.

. . . independent business writers, trainers, and content developers -- as well as people transitioning into these markets from other careers -- who depend on my coaching and experience to help them find the shortest path to success.

© Copyright 2007 Will Kenny/Best Training Practices. All Rights Reserved.  
Do not reproduce or excerpt without written permission

More articles and tips at [www.BestTrainingPractices.com](http://www.BestTrainingPractices.com)

[will@besttrainingpractices.com](mailto:will@besttrainingpractices.com)